

## Anurādha Sutta

### The Discourse to Anurādha

[The nature of the Tathāgata]  
(Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.86/3:116-119 = S 44.2/3:381-384)  
Translated by Piya Tan ©2006

#### Introduction

The Anurādha Sutta deals with the monk Anurādha's uncertainty regarding the nature of the Tathāgata after death. He holds the view that the Tathāgata's state is "apart" from the four logical premisses of ancient Indian philosophy [§5], thinking that the Buddha would describe him "in some other way" (SA 2:286). In this way, he commits another error: that of reifying the Tathāgata after his death.

When Anurādha declares his view to the outside sectarians in answer to their inquiry, they are not impressed and berate him. When Anurādha reports the incident to the Buddha, he gives an insightful answer, reflecting how we should respond to hostility toward the Buddha's teaching and what the teaching itself is about. The key message is stated at the very end of the sutta, when the Buddha declares:

**Formerly, Anurādha, and also now, I only teach suffering and the ending of suffering.** [§21]

This terse teaching here is elaborated in **the Yamaka Sutta** (S 22.85), which precedes it in the Saṃyutta, thus:

Friends, form is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ended and gone away.

Feeling is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ended and gone away.

Perception is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ended and gone away.

Formations are impermanent; what are impermanent are suffering; what are suffering have ended and gone away.

Consciousness is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ended and gone away. (S 22.85.37/3:112)

Commenting on the Buddha's terse statement above (in bold), **Bhikkhu Bodhi** says:

This oft-quoted dictum can be interpreted at two levels. At the more superficial level the Buddha can be read as saying that he does not make any declaration about such metaphysical questions as an afterlife but teaches only a practical path for reaching the end of suffering here and now.

This interpretation, however, does not connect the dictum with the Buddha's previous statement that the Tathāgata is not apprehended in this very life. To make this connection we have to bring in the second interpretation, according to which the "Tathāgata" is a mere term of conventional usage referring to a compound of impermanent formations, which are "suffering" because they contain no permanent essence. It is just these that stand while the Tathāgata lives, and just these that cease with his passing away. The context in which the dictum occurs at [**the Alagaddûpama Sutta**, M 1:140,14-15] also supports this interpretation. (S:B 1080 n165)

The related Alagaddûpama Sutta passages are as follows:

37 Saying thus, bhikshus, teaching thus, I have been baselessly, vainly, falsely and wrongly accused by some ascetics and brahmins thus, “A nihilist<sup>1</sup> is the ascetic Gotama. He teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existing individual.”<sup>2</sup>

As this is what I am not, as this is what I do not say, these good ascetics and brahmins have baselessly, vainly, falsely and wrongly accused thus, “A nihilist is the ascetic Gotama. He teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existing individual.”

38 Bhikshus, both **before<sup>3</sup> and now what I teach is suffering and the ending of suffering.**

If others abuse, revile, scold and harass the Tathāgata for that,<sup>4</sup> the Tathāgata on that account feels no annoyance, bitterness nor dejection of the heart.

If others honour, respect, revere and venerate the Tathāgata for that, the Tathāgata on that account feels no delight, joy nor elation of the heart.

If others honour, respect, revere and venerate the Tathāgata for that, the Tathāgata on that account thinks thus: “It is towards this [fivefold aggregate of mind-body]<sup>5</sup> that was earlier fully comprehended that they perform such acts.”<sup>6</sup>

39 Therefore, bhikshus, if others abuse, revile, scold and harass you, too, for that, on that account you should feel no annoyance, bitterness nor dejection of the heart.

If others honour, respect, revere and venerate you for that, on that account you should feel no delight, joy nor elation of the heart.

If others honour, respect, revere and venerate you for that, on that account you should think thus: “It is towards this [fivefold aggregate of mind-body] that was earlier fully comprehended that they perform such acts.”

This important statement at §21 of the Anurādha Sutta below and §38 of the Alagaddūpama Sutta above refer back to §37 above. Here the Buddha in effect declares that a living being has no self but is a mere aggregate of factors, material and mental events, connected by a process that is inherently *dukkha*, and that nirvana, the ending of *dukkha*, is not the annihilation of being but the termination of that very same *dukkha* process. This statement should read in conjunction with **the Kaccāna, gotta Sutta** (S 2:17),<sup>7</sup> where the Buddha says that one with right view, who has discarded all the doctrines of a self, sees that whatever arises is only *dukkha* arising, and whatever ceases is only *dukkha* ceasing. (See M:NB 2001:1211 n267)

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<sup>1</sup> Nihilist (*venayika*), which Comy glosses as *satta, vināsaka*, “destroyer of (the individuality of) a being.”

<sup>2</sup> This refers back to §20 where the eternalist misconstrues the Buddha’s teaching on nirvana as the annihilation of an existing being that is the self.

<sup>3</sup> Comy: That is, from as early as the first discourse given under the Bodhi tree (S 5:420-424/56.11, V 1:10-12).

<sup>4</sup> “For that,” that is, the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. (Comy)

<sup>5</sup> *Pañca-k, khandha*, that is, without the clinging (*upādāna*) (MA 2:118; see V 1:13 f).

<sup>6</sup> *Yam kho idaṃ pubbe pariññatam tattha me eva, rūpā kārā karīyanti*. In simpler terms, they honour only the Buddha’s awakening.

<sup>7</sup> S 2:17/12.15 = 3:134 f/22.90 = SD 6.13.

## The Discourse to Anurādha

(S 22.86/3:116-119 = S 44.2/3:381-384)

### Wanderers rebuke Anurādha

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in the Hall of the Gabled House<sup>8</sup> in Mahāvana [the Great Wood].

2 On one occasion, the venerable was dwelling in a forest hut not far from the Blessed One.

3 Then some wanderers of other sects approached the venerable Anurādha. Having approached the venerable Anurādha, they exchanged greetings with him. When they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, they sat down at one side.

4 Seated thus at one side, the wanderers of other sects said this to the venerable Anurādha:

“Avuso Anurādha, when a Tathagata is describing a Tathagata—the highest person, the supreme person, the attainer of the supreme<sup>9</sup>—he describes him in terms of these four grounds:

the Tathagata exists after death, or  
the Tathagata does not exist after death, or  
the Tathagata both exists and not exist after death, or  
the Tathagata neither exists nor not exist after death.”

5 When this was said, the venerable Anurādha said to those wanderers:

“Avuso, when a Tathagata is describing a Tathagata—the highest person, the supreme person, the attainer of the supreme—he describes him apart from these four grounds:

the Tathagata exists after death, or  
the Tathagata does not exist after death, or  
the Tathagata both exists and not exist after death, or  
the Tathagata neither exists nor not exist after death.”<sup>10</sup>

6 When this was said, those wanderers of other sects said this to the venerable Anurādha:

“This monk must be a newly ordained, not long gone forth; or, if he is an elder, he must be an incompetent fool!”<sup>11</sup>

7 Then the wanderers of other sects, having rebuked the venerable Anurādha with the word ‘newly ordained,’ and with the word ‘fool,’ rose from their seats and departed. [117]

8 Then, not long after those wanderers of other sects had left, the venerable Anurādha thought:

“If those were to question me further, how should I answer if I am to explain what has been said by the Blessed One without misrepresenting him with what is contrary to fact, but would explain the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, so that no colleague in the Dharma, following what has been said, would find ground for censure?”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> “The Hall of the Gabled House,” *kūṭ’āgāra,sālā*. This is a hall in the Great Forest (*Mahā,vana*), outside Vesālī. See DPPN: *kūṭāgārasālā*.

<sup>9</sup> *Tathāgato uttama,puriso parama,puriso parama,pattipatto*, also at **Kutūhala,sālā S** (S 44.9/4:398 f = SD 23.15), where the same claim is made by outside teachers. For Buddhists, this statement means that the Buddha is not a “being” as we know it, but a type of its own, as it were. In (**Pāda**) **Doṇa S** (A 4.26), the Buddha declares to Doṇa that he (the Buddha) is one of a kind, or is totally new kind of “person” (A 4.36/2:37-39).

<sup>10</sup> Comy: It is said that he (Anurādha) thought, “They contradict the Teaching, and are hostile to it. The Teacher would not describe (the Tathagata) according to what they say. He would describe him in some other way.” (SA 2:286)

<sup>11</sup> *So cāyam bhikkhu nava bhavissati acira,pabbajito, thero vā pana bālo avyatto ti*. “Newly ordained” (*bhikkhu nava*, usu *navaka bhikkhu*), ie, a monk of 5 rains or less. An elder (*thera*) is a monk of at least 10 rains.

<sup>12</sup> *Dhammassa cānudhamman vyākareyyam na ca koci sahadhammiko vādānupāto garayham thānam āgaccheyyā ti*. This stock: M 1:482, 483 (**Tevijja S** = SD 1.8); S 2:33, 36, 38 (x2), 41, 3:8, 117, 118 = 4:381, 381. Cf *saha,dhammikā vādānupātā garayhā thānā āgacchanti* (A 2:31 x2, 3:4 x2)

Anurādha approaches the Blessed One

**9** Then the venerable Anurādha approached the Blessed One. Having approached the Blessed One and saluted him, he sat down at one side.

**10a** Seated thus at one side, the venerable Anurādha said this to the Blessed One:

“Here I am, Venerable sir, dwelling here in a forest hut not far from the Blessed One. Then some wanderers of other sects approached me. Having approached me, we exchanged greetings. When we had concluded our greetings and cordial talk, they sat down at one side.

**10b** Seated thus at one side, the wanderers of other sects said this to me:

‘Avuso Anurādha, when a Tathagata is describing a Tathagata—the highest person, the supreme person, the attainer of the supreme<sup>13</sup>—he describes him in terms of these four grounds:

the Tathagata exists after death, or  
the Tathagata does not exist after death, or  
the Tathagata both exists and not exist after death, or  
the Tathagata neither exists nor not exist after death.’

**11** When this was said, I said to those wanderers:

‘Avuso, when a Tathagata is describing a Tathagata—the highest person, the supreme person, the attainer of the supreme—he describes him apart from these four grounds:

the Tathagata exists after death, or  
the Tathagata does not exist after death, or  
the Tathagata both exists and not exist after death, or  
the Tathagata neither exists nor not exist after death.’

**12** When this was said, those wanderers of other sects said this to the venerable Anurādha:

‘This monk must be a newly ordained, not long gone forth; or, if he is an elder, he must be an incompetent fool!’

**13** Then the wanderers of other sects, having rebuked me with the word ‘newly ordained,’ and with the word ‘fool,’ rose from their seats and departed. [118]

**14** Then, not long after those wanderers of other sects had left, I thought:

‘If those were to question me further, how should I answer if I am to explain what has been said by the Blessed One without misrepresenting him with what is contrary to fact, but would explain the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma, so that no colleague in the Dharma, following what has been said, would find ground for censure?’”

The three characteristics<sup>14</sup>

**15a** “What do you think, Anurādha, is form permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”<sup>15</sup>

“Unsatisfactory, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”<sup>16</sup>

“No, venerable sir.”

**15b** “Now, what do you think, Anurādha, is feeling permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”

“Unsatisfactory, venerable sir.”

<sup>13</sup> *Tathāgato uttama, puriso parama, puriso parama, pattipatto*. See §4 above n.

<sup>14</sup> §§15-18 are stock = **Anatta, lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59.12-22/3: 67 f) = SD 1.2.

<sup>15</sup> *dukkhaṃ vā sukhaṃ vā*, lit “suffering or happiness?”

<sup>16</sup> The notion “This is mine” arises through craving (*taṇhā*); the notion “This I am” arises through conceit (*māna*); the notion “This is my self” arises through views (*diṭṭhi*). See Peter Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:32 f.

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”

“No, venerable sir.”

**15c** “Now, what do you think, Anurādha, is perception permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”

“Unsatisfactory, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”

“No, venerable sir.”

**15d** “Now, what do you think, Anurādha, are formations permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”

“Unsatisfactory, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”

“No, venerable sir.”

**15e** “Now, what do you think, Anurādha, is consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent unsatisfactory or satisfactory?”

“Unsatisfactory, venerable sir.”

“Is what is impermanent, unsatisfactory and subject to change fit to be regarded thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this is my self.’?”

“No, venerable sir.”

### Universality of not-self

**16a** “Therefore, Anurādha, any kind of **form** whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near<sup>17</sup>—all forms should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’<sup>18</sup>

**16b** Therefore, Anurādha, any kind of **feeling** whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all feelings should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

<sup>17</sup> See S 22.48/3:47. This classification of the Aggregates is explained in detail in the Vibhaṅga and briefly in the Visuddhimagga: “**internal**” = physical sense-organs; “**external**” = physical sense-objects; “**gross**” = that which impinges (physical internal and external senses, with touch = earth, wind, fire); “**subtle**” = that which does not impinge (mind, mind-objects, mind-consciousness, and water); “**inferior**” = unpleasant and unacceptable sense-experiences [sense-world existence]; “**superior**” = pleasant and acceptable sense-experiences [form & formless existences]; “**far**” = subtle objects (“difficult to penetrate”); “**near**” = gross objects (“easy to penetrate”) (Vbh 1-13; Vism 14.73/450 f; Abhs 6.7). “Whether or not the details of the Vibhaṅga exposition are accepted as valid for the *nikāyas*, it seems clear that this formula is intended to indicate how each *khandha* is to be seen as a class of states, manifold in nature and displaying a considerable variety and also a certain hierarchy” (Gethin 1986:41).

<sup>18</sup> *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso ’ham asmī, na mēso attā ti*. This threefold formula is the contrary of “the 3 grasplings” (*ti, vidha gāha*), that is, of view (*diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*), of conceit (*māna*) (MA 2:111, 225): here applied to the 5 aggregates [17-21]. A brief version, “There can be no considering that (element) as ‘I’ or ‘mine’ or ‘I am’” (*ahan ti vā maman ti vā asmī ti vā*) is found in **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama S** (M 28/1:184-191 §§6b-7, 11b-12, 16b-17, 21b-22). These three considerations represent respectively the 3 kinds of **mental proliferation** (*papañca*) of self-view (*sakkāya diṭṭhi*), of craving (*taṇhā*) and of conceit (*māna*) (Nm 280; Vbh 393; Nett 37 f). In **Anatta, Jakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59.12-16/3:68), the formula is applied to the 5 aggregates & in **Pārileyya S** (S 22.81/ 3:94-99) to the 4 primary elements. See also **Rāhula S** (A 4.177/2:164 f). See **Pārileyya S**, SD 6.16 Introd (5).

**16c** Therefore, Anurādha, any kind of **perception** whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all perceptions should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

**16d** Therefore, Anurādha, any kind of **formations** whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all formations should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

**16e** Therefore, Anurādha, any kind of **consciousness** whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—all consciousness should be seen as they really are with right wisdom thus:

‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

### Disenchantment & liberation

**17a** Seeing thus, Anurādha, the learned noble disciple is revulsed [disenchanted] with form, is revulsed with feeling, is revulsed with perception, is revulsed with formations, is revulsed with consciousness.

Through revulsion, he becomes dispassionate.

Through dispassion, his mind is liberated.

**17b** When it is liberated, there arises the knowledge: ‘Free am I!’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. What needs to be done has been done. There is no more of this state of being.’

### The nature of the Tathagata

**18** What do you think, Anurādha, do you regard form as the Tathagata?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard feeling as the Tathagata?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard perception as the Tathagata?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard formations as the Tathagata?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard consciousness as the Tathagata?”

“No, venerable sir.”

**19** What do you think, Anurādha, do you regard the Tathagata as in form?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard the Tathagata as apart from form?”

“No, venerable sir.” “Do you regard the Tathagata as in feeling?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard the Tathagata as apart from feeling?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard the Tathagata as in perception?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard the Tathagata as apart from perception?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard the Tathagata as in formations?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard the Tathagata as apart from formations?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard the Tathagata as in consciousness?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Do you regard the Tathagata as apart from consciousness?”

“No, venerable sir.”

**20a** <sup>19</sup>“What do you think, Anurādha, do you regard form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness (taken together) as the Tathagata?”

“No, venerable sir.”

**20b** “What do you think, Anurādha, do you regard the Tathagata as one who is without form, without feeling, without perception, without formations, without consciousness?”

“No, venerable sir.”

**21** “But, Anurādha, when the Tathagata is not being apprehended by you as true and real<sup>20</sup> here in this very life, is it fitting for you to declare:

‘Avuso, when a Tathagata is describing a Tathagata—the highest person, the supreme person, the attainer of the supreme—he describes him apart from these four [119] grounds:

the Tathagata exists after death, or

the Tathagata does not exist after death, or

the Tathagata both exists and not exist after death, or

the Tathagata neither exists nor not exist after death.’?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“Good, Anurādha, good! Formerly, Anurādha, and also now, I only teach suffering and the ending of suffering.”<sup>21</sup>

— evaṃ —

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<sup>19</sup> *Taṃ kiṃ maññasi Anurādha rūpaṃ vedanā saññā saṅkhārā viññāṇaṃ tathāgato ti samanupassasī ti.* This difficult para is omitted from PTS ed. Be placed hiatus dots after each of the aggregate. Ce reads this para just as §18.

<sup>20</sup> “As true and real,” *saccato thetato*; as at **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22.25/1:138; cf 22.36/1:140); **Yamaka S** (S 22.85.34/3:112); **Anurādha S** (S 22.86.21/3:118 = S 44.2.21/4:384); **Titth’āyatana S** (A 3.61.2-4/1:174 f x3); **Vbh** 376 f (×4), 382 (× 6); **Pug** 3.17/38 (×12); **Kvu** 67 f (×13). **Vbh:T** tr *staccato thetato* as “firmly as truth” (**Vbh:T** 487).

<sup>21</sup> This last remark is explained in **Yamaka S** (S 22.85.37/3:112). See **Introd.**